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Investigating a Reference: A Door to Understanding

In Tracy Kidder's *Mountain's Beyond Mountains*, the riveting account about the life and work of infectious disease specialist, Dr. Paul Farmer, the author, makes a reference to something called The School of the Americas. My project in this short paper is to research this reference to gain a clearer understanding of it.

The reference occurs in Chapter Two which provides background information on Haitian politics and U.S foreign policy and military involvement in that region. Specifically, the chapter traces the political history of Haiti, emphasizing the initial period of self-sufficiency that preceded the long periods of instability. However, the chapter's specific focus is on subsequent foreign takeovers, occupations, and interventions. When Kidder refers to "the infamous School of the Americas," we can see that Kidder does not endorse the work being done there. But what exactly is the School of the Americas?

Much conflicting information exists on the world wide web. The Center for International Policy describes it as follows on its web site: "The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), located at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia, is the Defense Department's principal Spanish-language training facility for Latin American military and law-enforcement personnel (though some civilians attend as well). It is the successor to the School of the Americas (SOA), a facility established in 1946 and legally closed in 2001" (<http://www.ciponline.org/facts/soa.htm>)

Of course, the U.S. government is interested in protecting its reputations and unlikely to reveal any negative information. Additional information can be found on Wikipedia which gives a more thorough account of the criticism leveled at SOA. The criticism focuses on the human rights violations committed by some of the graduates of SOA. It is believed that the education at SOA promoted violent practices and that the site trained military insurgents, dictators, and terrorists. (www.wikipedia.School_of_the_Americas.com)

Coming across the reference to The School of the Americas, readers may have understood, as I did, that this was an organization that both Kidder and Farmer saw in a negative light, but further research has provided much additional clarification on this reference. Whereas readers may have imagined a traditional school, readers now understand that the School of the Americas is a site where the U.S. government trains members of foreign military. Clearly, in this case, additional research has proven invaluable to a reader's understanding of Kidder's and Farmer's perspective on the School of the Americas and allowed them to better understand this antipathy within the context of *Mountains Beyond Mountains*.